

# The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Two - Part 3: Procuring a Cure

by [The Space Witches](#)



John and Matthew on the Excelsior's bridge

## Chapter 1

February 2269

A few weeks after the eventful working vacation on Eriadne, I was reading crew evaluation reports in my quarters, trying to get back in the routine of work, when the call came in. As I was sprawled on the bed at the time, comfortable in a t-shirt and shorts, I took the call on my commlink. My First Officer's voice was heavy with disapproval.

"We have a gentleman who calls himself 'Knuckles Malone' who wishes to speak to you, Captain. He says that it's confidential, personal, and urgent."

I grinned. "That's Malone-speak for, 'I need a loan or I'm going to lose another finger.' Put him through to my viewscreen, will you?" I closed the commlink and hauled myself off the bed, pulling on a pair of pants as I hopped through to my desk.

John gave me just enough time to get respectable before he put the call through.

It's little touches like that, that make a great First Officer, so I decided to keep him for a bit longer. I'd been thinking about trading him in for something prettier recently, but had decided against it for two reasons. First, Lily would kill me, and then when she'd finished with me, Deborah would kill me. A man can only cope with so much being killed by beautiful women, so I'd made my mind up to hang onto John for a while. He may not be my type, but a lot of women seemed to find him cute. They may

as well give up. Unless they have flaming red hair, are about a meter and a half high, and called Lily, he's just not interested.

The viewer cleared and showed a face that, even to me, made John look downright appealing by comparison. Somehow, I doubt if even Knuckles' mother had thought he was a beautiful baby. Nurture hadn't improved on nature when it had broken his nose in more places than you would have thought possible, and I'd always assumed that my old friend... acquaintance... had a phobia about dentists. Nothing else could explain the collection of black and broken stumps he laughingly called teeth. Knuckles was scary when he frowned, but downright terrifying when he smiled.

"How're you doing, Knuckles? Show me your hands." I grinned up at the screen, then winced as he brought his hands up. The last two fingers on both hands were missing, as well as the top two phalanges of the middle finger on his left hand and the top phalange of the middle finger on the right. Both index fingers and thumbs were still intact. The cards must have been kind to Knuckles. I shook my head at what I saw. "Hell, Knuckles, the insurance companies are going to catch on to you one day. You can't keep on claiming for losing bits of you every time you run out of money."

He grinned back, [Oh shit, those teeth are even worse than the last time I saw him. The phobia must extend to toothbrushes as well,] and spoke in a voice roughened by too much raw booze and too many long nights at the poker table, screaming in anguish at his bad luck. "Then you'd better help me out before I have to cut off another finger, hadn't you?"

"Knuckles, if you're after a loan..." He held up his hand--half hand--to stop me.

"Not a loan, Matt. I've got something to sell." Knuckles was doing his very best to look sincere and respectable. I don't know why he wasted his time. [Hey, this is Matt. Remember me? The guy you left in a drunken stupor in that whorehouse on... where the hell was that place?] I shook my head to clear some unpleasant memories of the last time I'd encountered Knuckles.

I'd won big that night, and he and a few of the other guys had decided that it would be a good idea to celebrate in the local brothel. I'd been happy to go along and buy a few drinks, but I'd always stuck to a 'look, but don't touch' approach in those places. Well, someone [Was that you, Knuckles?] had spiked my drink, and I'd woken up the following morning wishing that someone would cut my head off and take my tongue to the cleaners. When I saw what was lying next to me in bed... [Don't go there, Matt. You were almost certainly incapable of doing anything with her. At least, I *think* it was a her.]

"So what are you selling? And why should I be buying?" I leaned back nonchalantly in my chair, just passing the time. Hell, it beat crew evaluation reports. Knuckles smiled again. I wished he wouldn't do that.

"You're a big shot now, Matt. Flying round in that fancy ship, looking to save the human race. Well, I got a lead for you, something that might just help you do that, save humanity get you a medal of honor, and all that crap."

I felt no hesitation in letting him see the full scope of my skepticism. "You? Have you been frequenting some scientific conventions recently? Got your Master's in Virology?"

Knuckles looked hurt. Well, he always looked hurt--he couldn't help it with a face like a crater, but he looked even more hurt than usual. "Now, is that how you treat an old friend, Matt? Don't be such a cynic." I wondered briefly whether he knew what the last word meant, but he went on, "I got contacts,

and one of them has just come in from the Rim and he's been on a planet where they have these amazing plants. The locals use them to make drugs that cure just about anything. How much is the location of that planet worth to you, Matt? How much is it worth to Earth?"

I laughed in his face. "Oh, nice try, Knuckles. If I had a credit for every call I've had from an old poker buddy who wanted to sell me a tip-off, I'd retire right now."

Knuckles shook his head and held up his right hand again. "So little faith. Watch, Matt. Watch and believe."

I watched in silence as he took a small bottle from one of his numerous pockets. Unscrewing the lid, he dropped a few spots of liquid onto the end of the middle finger of his right hand. He carried on talking as he kept his hand held up in front of the screen.

"This is just a small sample. When I got it, I was down to half a finger and a thumb on each hand. The cards had been bad, Matt. I'd had to put in a lot of insurance claims. When the guy told me that I could regrow the missing parts if I used this stuff, I laughed at him, just like you laughed at me, but I figured, what did I have to lose? So I tried it."

I was staring at his hand as he spoke, hardly able to believe what I was seeing. The middle finger was growing back as I watched. It had reached the base of the nail as Knuckles was speaking. He carried on.

"This little bottle cost me every credit I had and there's just enough left to regrow both middle fingers. But if I want more, it's gonna cost me a LOT. So I wondered who I could hit on for the credits. Well, no one I know would give me a loan, but I thought maybe my old pal Matt Gideon would pay well for the location of where this stuff comes from. You interested, Matt?"

I leaned back in my chair, hiding the excitement I could feel building inside me. I was damned sure that Sarah could do something with this stuff, if I could only get my hands on it. And speaking of hands, Knuckles' finger had regrown to halfway up the nail. At this rate, we'd have to find a new nickname for him.

"OK, you've got my attention. What's the deal? I warn you, Knuckles, credits are scarce around here. Getting money out of EarthGov these days is tough and takes a long time." That was the whole unvarnished truth. I hadn't been paid for two years, and the credits I'd had off-Earth before the plague hit were almost gone. Most of the crew hadn't been paid regularly, either. While John and I had made sure that any money that had gotten through had gone straight to the crew, there were still people with families to support who were hurting. So little by little, what capital I'd had stashed away had been eaten away in loans to keep those families in little luxuries like food. Just about the only assets I had left were one account with a few thousand credits in it and the book that Deborah had given me. While I knew that I might have to sell the book, the funds I could get for it were already reserved in my mind for one thing and one thing only. But that would have to wait until we found the cure.

Knuckles tried to stiff me for a ten grand introducer's fee and I laughed in his face. I couldn't afford that much, anyway. I got him down to five, which I could cover from my sole remaining account and we agreed to terms. He only got his fee after I'd met the person who could sell me a further sample of the liquid and the location of the planet. Knuckles would get his credits when the sample tested out.

We arranged to meet in a bar we both knew on Vega colony in six days' time. It was a dive where the local lowlife hung out, but there was always a decent game going on there.

After I signed off, I called the bridge to change course for the Vega system, then walked back to my bed and pulled off my pants, gathering all the crew evaluation reports into a nice neat pile, [Deborah would be proud of me,] and dropped them on the floor. [Or maybe she wouldn't.] I climbed into bed and wondered how I was going to pay the person who would sell me the sample. One good thing was that Vega colony had a thriving black market. Now just how many ship's supplies would John be able to cover in the records if I sold them to raise funds?

I put the thought aside as I called for the lights to go off and lay back in my bed, thinking about the woman I'd left behind on Eriadne, the son of mine she was carrying, and dreaming of how I was going to get back to them both in time for his birth.

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Looking around at my audience, I could see a mixture of surprise, enthusiasm, and skepticism to the vid I'd just shown. I'd edited out most of the conversation I'd had with Malone and just left the important part, the part where we could see his finger growing back.

My XO was majoring in surprise. John was damned good at covering his feelings, but I'd learned to read him over the years. The image on the screen left him wide-eyed.

Sarah Chambers was almost salivating. That must be a first; a beautiful woman drooling over anything to do with Knuckles. It was a horrible thought. She turned to me, her eyes bright with excitement. "I want it, Matt and I want it now!" I decided that under no circumstances was I going to let Sarah anywhere near Malone. If she came out with a line like that within his hearing, she just might get more than she expected.

Not surprisingly, it was my favorite xenoarcheologist who was the skeptic of the group. "Oh, come on, Sarah, it's a con. It has to be. And I'm surprised that our oh-so-cynical Captain has fallen for it." I love it when Max uses that tone of voice and has that expression on his face. It gives me an excuse for the fantasies I sometimes have about throwing him out of an airlock, naked. With one of his corrupt data crystals stuffed up his... never mind.

I looked hurt and used my most disappointed voice as I responded, "So I guess you won't be willing to loan me the credits to fund this exercise then, Max? For the good of Earth and humanity?" I never expected he would, but couldn't resist putting him on the spot. His snort of derision was answer enough. "Thought as much. OK, so we go to Plan B."

Matheson looked instantly worried; he knows me too well. "What does Plan B involve, Captain?"

I explained that we would aim to arrive at Vega colony a couple of days ahead of Malone. "I need five thousand for his introducer's fee, but if the sample checks out, we could need as much as a hundred grand to pay for a decent quantity of the stuff and for the location of the planet it comes from. As Mr. Eilerson isn't feeling charitable today, there's only one way I can think of to raise that sort of money. I'm going to have to win it at poker."

When they'd all climbed back down from the ceiling, I explained, "The place where I'm meeting Malone always has a high stakes game going on in the back room. If I can get in on it, I can get the money over a couple of days, but I need twenty grand to sit down at that table, and I don't have that sort of cash anymore. I barely have enough to cover Knuckles' fee. So we're going to have to raise about fifteen thousand credits to get me into the game."

I turned to my XO and put on my best pleading expression. "John? Could you go through supplies and work out what we can sell on the black market down there to raise the money?" I turned to Sarah and said, "And doctor, if there are any medical supplies you could 'lose', that might help, too."

I scraped them back off the ceiling again and explained some facts of life. You would have thought a doctor would have learned them by her age, but I'd always known that John was a bit of an innocent. Max just sat looking cynical, but then he does have the face for it.

"If there's any chance that this could give us a lead on a cure, then we take it. I'll do whatever needs doing, and that includes breaking every Earthforce regulation in existence, except the one relating to intimate relations with animals. That's a definite no-go area. I could try going through seventeen different layers of bureaucracy to get this funding, and we'd still be in orbit above Vega when the last person on Earth dies. I could try to get the money from Sheridan and the ISA and go through the Rangers, but even that would take time we don't have. So we do it the fast way, the dirty way, and we cover our tracks so we don't get caught. Lieutenant, Doctor, I want those lists of disposable supplies on my desk by noon. Any more questions?"

I got three shaking heads so then broke up the meeting. John and Max left, but Sarah lingered as the doors to the conference room closed behind them. "Got a minute, Matt?"

I waved her back to the table and poured us both a coffee. I'd wanted to catch up with her, anyway. "I received your formal progress report yesterday, Sarah, but I wanted to hear what you really think, not what you're prepared to put into a report. So how's it going?"

Sarah brought me up to date. What it came down to was that we were making progress on two fronts. One was an instrument we'd brought back from Eriadne that seemed to hold some promise of removing the virus from an infected person's body. The second related to a vaccination to prevent re-infection, which built on the findings Max had made in the ruins on Eriadne.

My ship's doctor continued, "The problem is that these are slow. Even if we can get them to work together, it's going to take a long time to cure every person and every air-breathing mammal on Earth, and in that time, a lot more people will die. So if there's any chance of a quicker way, we have to go for it."

Sarah's passion for her work spilled out as she spoke. I knew that she was driven, not just by the need to save every person on Earth, but on a more personal level, by her need to save her sister and niece. She'd told me a few days before that her sister was sick, and on Earth these days, any sickness, even things that had previously been curable or non-fatal, led inevitably to a steady deterioration and death. So Sarah was now under more pressure than ever, and I was worried about her. The previous year, the death of the last Zanderi on Theta 49 had led to her having a minor breakdown. I didn't want that happening again, so I was willing to do whatever I could to keep her hopes alive, to keep Sarah Chambers from cracking up again. That wasn't just because without her, our hopes for finding a cure were diminished. She was a friend who I cared about.

Sarah finished her summary, "So, if there's any way we can get hold of this stuff, Matt, we should. It might give us a quicker answer and we can save a lot more lives. But what happens if we get caught? What will happen to you and John if they find out that you've been selling ship's supplies on the black market?"

I tried to reassure her, "Don't worry about John. Anything he does, he'll just be obeying orders. I

wouldn't do anything that would put him at risk. There are too many people watching him too closely for me to jeopardize his career."

Sarah smiled gently. "And you Matt? What about you?"

I laughed. "If they catch me, they'll court-martial me. I'll get slung out of the service with a dishonorable discharge, no pension, and maybe even a short prison sentence. Then I'll go back to Eriadne and live in luxury with the woman I love and our son. Somehow, court martial doesn't quite hold the threat it once did." I chased Sarah out of the conference room, telling her to get back to Medbay and get working. Then I sat and brooded for a while. It's something I've gotten damned good at over the years, but I've had a lot of practice.

Despite what I'd told Sarah, I'd much rather not get caught. I still had a job to finish, although I was getting more and more pessimistic about my ability to complete the task I'd been given. Over two years had gone by since I'd been given command of the Excalibur, and in that time, we'd really only achieved three things of any significance.

The screen Sarah and Galen had made from the Technomage virus had seemed like a giant leap forward at the time, but had dead-ended. The data Max had found on Eriadne might revive that line of research, but it was too early to call at that point. The instruments we'd brought back from Eriadne were our third positive finding.

But what did that really mean? The virus screen had come from the Technomages, who were hiding from us and unwilling to help, and I'd just chased the only Technomage who *had* been willing to help us off my ship. Nice going, Matt.

The instruments we'd brought back were leftover Vorlon technology, and the planets that race had vacated were off limits to our search. Anyone trying to go into that territory was firmly turned away.

The data Max had found was all based on Shadow tech. We had no chance of getting any more of that, as the Drakh stood firmly in the way.

So the only three things we'd found of any significance were all from sources that were otherwise closed to us. Unless we could find another planet like Eriadne, a Vorlon training center with some of their technology left behind, those three sources had dried up.

I had to go after any and every other possible lead, regardless of the cost or the consequences. Time was running out.

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"Turnips? Lieutenant, is that the best you could come up with?" Those damned turnips had been festering in the hold for months. I had no idea why Earthforce had sent them to us, but we hadn't been able to find a single person on board who liked turnips. Upon our return from Eriadne, John had told me that Lily loved turnips, but I'd warned him that it didn't matter how much she liked them, a gift of five hundred kilos of the damned things would *not* be considered romantic. "Do you really think we can raise fifteen thousand credits from turnips?"

John looked as stubborn as I'd ever seen him as he replied, "There are a LOT of turnips in the hold, Captain, and they might be a delicacy on Vega. They could be worth a lot there."

I shook my head. "John, there's nowhere in the galaxy where turnips are a delicacy. If there were, we wouldn't have been sent them! What else have you got?"

My XO reluctantly pushed a data pad over my desk to me, his mouth set in a firm line. I picked it up, looking at the first item and sighing, "Brussels sprouts are no better. I don't care how many of them we have, I'll never be able to get the price I need." Apparently, Lily loved Brussels sprouts, too. Must be a redhead thing. I kept going down the list. "Blankets are better and boots are good. I had no idea we had so many spare boots on board."

The next item made me laugh. "Hell, John, has Eilerson seen this list?" Matheson shook his head. "He'll go berserk when he realizes that we've sold his spare drills and earthmoving equipment. OK, when you put this lot together, we should be able to get a decent amount."

I turned to Sarah. "So what do you have for me, Doctor?"

Sarah's mouth was set even more firmly than John's. "I am not giving you drugs to sell on the black market, Matt!"

I looked at her in surprise, "Sarah, I'd never ask you to do that! But we must have some other medical supplies that would be useful, worth something, and that we wouldn't miss too much. Think of it as providing much-needed medical support to an ex-colony that must be suffering since Earth has been cut off as a source of supplies."

Muttering something about me being able to sell the Brooklyn Bridge, my doctor pushed her own data pad over.

"Sarah, why do we have fifteen hundred first aid kits in stock? That's five for every person aboard. We can't need that many Band Aids."

She mumbled something about a wrong decimal place on the order form and I decided not to pursue it. The rest of her list was made up of mild analgesics, calamine lotion, indigestion tablets, and iodine. Nothing spectacular, but the sort of things that could sell well on an isolated planet. Between them, I decided they'd done enough.

"OK, leave the lists with me. I'll need to make some calls to set up the sales."

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So here we were... well, we were somewhere, I just wasn't quite sure where. I had instructions to be on a specific corner at a specific time, and I'd be approached. Now I just had to find the right place and acquire enough credits from the sale of our liberated goods to get myself into the poker game. Oh, and then I just had to turn a twenty-thousand stake into a hundred thousand credits. Easy. That's why they made me Captain.

"OK, I admit it. I'm lost." If a telepath's look could kill, at that moment I would have been struck down dead by my First Officer and one-time friend, John Matheson. He hadn't wanted anything to do with this whole deal, but I'd persuaded him to come down to Vega with me, as I needed to make sure I wasn't being scanned during the deal with the black market contact I'd made. John had reluctantly agreed, so we'd both put on some suitably scruffy civilian clothes--OK, my clothes were scruffy, John's were clean and neatly pressed. That man could walk out of a sewer looking neat and tidy--and gone down to the main settlement.

We'd landed the shuttle a couple hours walk away and hiked into the town, then gone looking for the bar I remembered from my last visit. The trouble was that I hadn't been there for a few years, and the town had grown since then. Nothing looked quite as I remembered it and I'd soon got us completely lost. For some reason, John seemed to find this annoying. Perhaps it was because I'd repeatedly assured him that I knew exactly where we were. I sometimes think my XO is a little too uptight.

I was getting a little concerned myself as we were due to meet our contact in less than half an hour. I'd called up some of my less-reputable poker pals to find the contact, [OK, they don't get much less reputable than Knuckles,] and had been told that Mr. or Ms. 'Smith' was interested in the merchandise I had for sale. I'd never met the person whom we'd be dealing with, but I'd been told that they'd been given my description and would make the approach.

"Captain..."

"Don't call me that. Call me Matt, or better yet, call me Max." We'd deliberately left all forms of identification on board the ship. I didn't think anything would go wrong, but just in case... My First Officer ignored the second suggestion.

"Matthew. Why don't we ask someone for directions?" They could have invented the phrase 'long-suffering' for the expression on John's face.

"Because then everyone would know that we're strangers and that we're lost."

"I think the fact that we've crossed this square four times in the last half hour might be a bit of a giveaway, Cap... Matthew." The last thing I needed from a First Officer at that moment was logic. I peered at the side of his head, looking for pointy ears, for the first time in my life having some sympathy for James T. Kirk. I'd always hated him until then. Bastard always got the girls and made every Starship Captain who followed him feel inadequate.

"John, I know exactly where we are. I just don't quite know where that is." I hurried on before he could speak. "When I was here last, this was an Earth colony, and they named all the streets after Earth historical figures. Since they achieved independence they renamed everything. It's a bit like the guy in the twentieth century who was born in St. Petersburg, educated in Petrograd, worked in Leningrad, and retired in St. Petersburg. Never moved house."

We were walking as I spoke, and John didn't seem to be appreciating the fascinating historical insight I was giving him, when a familiar building caught my eye. Now if I had this right, then we were to turn left at the next junction and then cross the park... I tried not to gloat when we arrived at the shop-front we'd been looking for, five minutes before we were due to meet the contact. I think I failed.

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"You selling?" The woman who approached us was big. In every dimension. Not fat, just big. She could look me straight in the eye and certainly outweighed me by a good 20 kilos or more. Her hair was a striking shade of red, [I do mean red, not the orange color often described as red. This was scarlet] piled into an intricate tangle on top of her head, making her appear to tower over me. Heavy make-up made it impossible to judge her age, but she was no teenager. Everything about her said this was a woman who knew what she wanted. She looked mean and hungry, and the way she was looking at John made me think that she might just decide to snack on him.

"Might be. If you're buying and interested in what I've got for sale." As I answered her question, her eyes flicked back to me, roved from my head to my feet, lingered briefly at my crotch, and then she dismissed me to go back to undressing John with her eyes. I was horrified to discover that I was distinctly miffed. What am I? Week-old flarn? Is John that much more appealing than me? Don't answer that. But this looked promising; we'd made contact with our buyer.

"Well, have you seen what we have for sale?" I tried to drag her attention back from John, as he was starting to blush under her intense scrutiny.

This time she turned to look at me properly. "Oh yeah, and I like what I've seen." Well, this was going to be easier than I expected.

I smiled my most charming and seductive smile at her. "So make me an offer."

She laughed at me, displaying a set of large, even, white teeth. "So you do the negotiating, do you? Doesn't your friend here get a say? Does he talk?" She reached out and ran her finger along John's jaw-line. I could see him struggling not to pull away; it must have been difficult for him to maintain his shields with her making actual physical contact.

"Yes, you negotiate with me. My friend will talk when the deal's done. He'll show you in detail exactly what you've bought." I watched as her smile widened, that prospect obviously appealed to her. "So how much are you willing to pay?"

The redhead narrowed her eyes and looked suspicious. "Well, that depends on what I'm going to get for my credits. Are there any conditions I should know about? Or can I do whatever I want with the goods?"

I held my hands up in reassurance. "Once we agree on a price, the merchandise is all yours. You can do what you like with it. Now if you're really interested, what will you give me?"

She bit her lip and turned back to look at John again. For a moment I wondered whether she'd worked out what he was there for and was going to back off. I needn't have worried. She just seemed to be enjoying the view and doing that optical strip job again. John was definitely blushing by now.

The woman reached a decision. "Fifteen. It's more than I'd usually pay, but I think in this case it might be worth it."

I was delighted. If she was starting at fifteen thousand, I could certainly get more, and the more I could get as stake money, the easier it would be to win the rest. We dickered for a while before settling on a final price of twenty-two.

She offered her hand to shake on the deal, and the next thing I knew, I was pinned with my face to the wall and my arm pushed up between my shoulder blades. Her knee was jammed between my legs and I knew that if I even tried to struggle, I'd end up with a dislocated shoulder and seriously bruised balls. I held still, hearing John yell out next to me. When I turned my head, I saw that a man in uniform was holding him in the same position.

The redhead hissed in my ear. "You are under arrest for soliciting for prostitution in a public place, living on the earnings of a prostitute and exercising control over a prostitute. In other words, for being a pimp."

They put John and me into a large holding cell while they decided what charges to bring against us. The arresting officer, Sergeant Callaghan, had decided that she could add a few more when she discovered that we weren't carrying ID. Apparently, this was a serious offense on Vega. The other occupants of the cell were mainly drunks and prostitutes who showed little interest in the new arrivals, so John and I sat on the floor and looked at each other. I could see that John was *not* happy with the way things had worked out. No, he wasn't happy at all.

"What made you think she was our contact?" John was speaking through clenched teeth. If he didn't lighten up soon, he was going to start cracking enamel.

I tried to smile disarmingly. "Well, it made sense. She said she was interested in buying. How the hell was I supposed to know that she thought she was buying you?"

It had transpired that the offer Sergeant Callaghan had made me was not twenty-two thousand credits for the merchandise I was selling, but twenty-two hundred for a night of passion with John. As far as I was concerned, he should have taken that as a compliment. Twenty-two hundred a night was top dollar for a whore on Vega! Don't ask me how I know that. I thought that I was by far the more injured party in that the Sergeant had mistaken me for a pimp. John didn't see it that way.

"So just how do we get out of this, Matt, or is it Lucas?" John's voice dripped venom as he used the name I'd given at the desk. When I realized that arrest was inevitable, I'd decided to use my ancestor's name. If I were really lucky, at some time in the future, he would end up on this planet and be seriously inconvenienced by having a criminal record. That's if I didn't catch up with the bastard and kill him first. So now the Vega police were holding Lucas Buck for pimping and John Sheridan for prostitution. I'd nearly choked when I heard the name John decided to give when he was booked. If the President ever found out about this...

But John's question was a good one. How the hell was I going to get us out of this one? There seemed to be only two choices. We could plead guilty on all counts and hope that the penalty would be a fine that came to less than the credits we had, but then we'd be even further from getting the stake we needed for the poker game. Or we could tell the nice Sergeant what we were *really* doing on Vega, then she could tell Earthforce and we could be court-martialled. Despite what I'd told Sarah, there was a good chance that John would suffer too, because by coming down to the planet with me, he'd gone beyond what could be reasonably excused by only following orders. [Very clever, Matt. You've not only fucked up your own career, you've ruined John's too. Take a bow.]

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The old man in the brown robes looked at the image in the ball in his hands and shook his head. Didn't these people know what responsibilities they carried? How were they supposed to save humanity if they were stuck in jail on a backwater planet at the wrong end of the galaxy? He'd gone to great lengths to get that sample to Captain Gideon's acquaintance and now the idiot Earthforce officer had gotten himself into a complete mess instead of following the trail he'd so carefully created. The old man sighed. Well, he supposed he'd better do something to get the humans back on the right track.

It would serve them right if he let the two men bond together for a little bit longer in the jail cell. No doubt the Captain was being verbally whipped and castrated by his long-suffering Executive Officer. If he stayed there long enough, maybe, just maybe, he'd learn something from the experience.

No. He shouldn't do that, there were too many peoples' lives riding on that idiot's shoulders. Electrons and Protons, didn't that man know anything about doing black market deals? While it would be amusing to watch the XO abuse his Captain for a while longer, the old man decided that he had to do the right thing.

[I never get to have any fun,] the man in the brown robes sighed, which earned a chirp from his pocket. The old man smiled a wicked smile, for once not looking very grandfatherly. If someone thought him grandfatherly before, his smile would quickly convince them that he was the type of man who would lead his grandchildren, Hansel and Gretel, to the gingerbread house, and laugh while doing so.

"You're right. I can hold this over his head forever! Now, the question is, who should we get to help our little lost souls? It has to be someone who will enjoy the irony of this situation, and someone who needs a good laugh."

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Sarah Chambers was working in her office when the call came in. The viewer showed a rainbow array of colors and the voice was unknown to her, but the message was clear. Matt and John were in trouble and needed help. The voice gave very specific instructions on exactly what Sarah was to do and then cut off abruptly.

The doctor sat back in her chair and pondered. The voice may have been unfamiliar but there was something about the quality of it, the phrasing and the accent, that was memorable. It reminded her of Galen, currently persona non grata around the Excalibur, but who could be really useful right now.

Sarah made up her mind. She'd follow the instructions up to a point. Then she'd see. If nothing else, at least this incident was breaking the boring routine of her day. The doctor suddenly laughed hard. "I'm never going to let him live this one down!"

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John and I were taken from the holding cell to an interview room at the back of the police station. When the door opened and I saw my ship's doctor sitting there, chatting amicably with Sergeant Callaghan, I knew I was in the worst trouble yet. Sarah would *never* let me forget this one.

Callaghan displayed those big white teeth when she smiled at my XO and me, but I noticed that her eyes still drifted over John's body in a way that obviously made him a little uncomfortable. If Sarah hadn't been there, I might have thought that she'd changed her mind and wanted to go through with the deal for a few hours of John's time and attention. The two women seemed relaxed and friendly as we were brought in, hands still cuffed behind our backs, as we sat in hard chairs facing them.

"Well, Captain, you have gotten yourself into a mess, haven't you?" As Callaghan spoke, all thoughts of keeping my identity hidden fled. I glared at Sarah, wondering if I'd made her think that I actually liked the idea of court martial.

Callaghan went on to explain that Sarah had originally come to post bail for us both, then the two women had got to talking and Sarah had decided to trust the redheaded policewoman with our secrets. [Thanks for consulting me on that one, Sarah.] As it turned out, Sarah had been right to do so. Callaghan found the whole situation incredibly amusing and was more than happy to drop all the charges. She then really surprised me by asking to see the list of goods I had planned to sell.

As the contents of our pockets had been taken from us when we were arrested, I explained that I couldn't do that, so Callaghan left to get our things back. As soon as she left the interview room, I turned to Sarah and asked, "How did you know to come get us? We haven't been allowed to call anyone yet."

Sarah opened her mouth to explain, but Callaghan returned, bringing with her our possessions, including the five thousand credits I'd been carrying. She undid our handcuffs, so I handed the policewoman the data crystal with our sales inventory, and she dropped it onto a reader. There was silence for a while before she looked up, a broad grin once again displaying those scary teeth. "You have sprouts? Real, genuine Brussels sprouts?"

I blinked several times before nodding. Callaghan looked at me askance. "And you were going to sell me this quantity for twenty-two thousand credits? Hell, Captain, I should hold you to that deal! Do you have any idea how long it's been since we got Earth-grown vegetables out here? Sure, we grow stuff locally, but it just doesn't taste the same. Real, honest-to-goodness, Earth-grown Brussels sprouts will fetch a premium price here. What else do you have?"

She carried on down the list. I just knew what was coming next. "And turnips? You have turnips too? Five hundred kilos of turnips? Earth vegetables of any kind fetch around a hundred credits a kilo here right now. Your turnips alone are worth fifty thousand credits. Add the sprouts and that's..." she paused to do the mental arithmetic, "eighty thousand credits." John was never going to let me forget this.

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To cut a long story short, Callaghan put us in touch with some legitimate local traders who bought our entire stock of merchandise for just over one hundred thousand credits and were willing not to disclose their source of supply. This gave us more than enough to pay Knuckles his introducer's fee and pay for a sample of the drug and the location of the planet it came from. I never did get to sit in on that poker game. I kept trying to persuade John and Sarah that I could take the hundred thousand and turn it into a much bigger sum, something we could use next time we needed some credits. They refused to listen and as Callaghan had released me into Sarah's custody, there wasn't a lot I could do about it except sulk all the way back to the ship.

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We were on our way to the planet where the drug had come from when Sarah dropped by my quarters, bringing a crystal with her.

"Another of Mr. Eilerson's special videos, Sarah?" That earned me a punch in the arm as she walked to the view screen and dropped the crystal in the slot. I wished Sarah wouldn't hit me, she's a big girl and I bruise easily. I was going to tell her as much when my attention was attracted by the voice emerging from my viewscreen. The screen showed nothing but a rainbow of color, but the voice giving careful instructions was familiar to me.

Sarah waited for the crystal to finish, then turned to face me, leaning back against the shelf under the view screen. "Any idea who that was?"

I nodded. "Oh, yes. That was another rogue Technomage. His name is Alwyn, and he and Galen go back a long way together." I nearly spat out Galen's name--the name of the man who'd once been my

friend but who had twice betrayed me. I could feel my anger rising as I spoke. "Looks like Galen has set him to spy on us."

Sarah tried to calm me. "Matt, I know you're angry with Galen for what he did. I also know you feel he betrayed your trust. I'm nearly as angry as you are about all this. Galen helped the murderer of Dureena's child escape. Dureena is my friend, Matt, and I'm as outraged as you that Galen prevented you from bringing Lucas Buck to justice, but we don't know Galen's reasons for what he did. One thing I learned about Galen was that he always had reasons. They may not be obvious, but they're always there. So if he has asked this Alwyn to keep an eye on us, maybe it wasn't meant to be spying. Maybe it was meant to do exactly what has been done--to provide help when we need it. Especially when you're doing something incredibly stupid."

I raised an eyebrow at the last comment, but was still too angry with Galen to be reasonable. "I don't care about his reasons, Sarah. I don't want to see him or any others of his kind on my ship again, and I don't want them interfering with our lives. That's final."

I'm sure I've made more stupid and inaccurate statements in my life, but right now I can't think of any.

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My XO eventually forgave me for getting us both into such a mess and the planet we found as a result of Knuckles' call turned out to be a cornucopia of pharmaceutical goodies. Nothing that helped with the cure, but the plants there provided a whole new range of analgesics, a regrowth formula that became the standard treatment in all cases of amputation, and the most amazingly effective aphrodisiac ever known to man.

The effect it had on the average human male could only be compared to the Excalibur's main gun. It brought everything up on line damned quickly, it provided an emission more powerful than anything previously experienced, and it only took a minute to recharge. Amazing stuff. So I hear, anyway.

Inevitably, Max smuggled samples out to IPX and the bonuses he got made him even wealthier than he had been before. I sometimes wondered why he bothered to keep on working with us, then I'd see the look in his eyes when he thought no one was watching him. Max was longing for and missing Ilas and Dureena as much as I missed Deborah and John missed Lily and Luke. I promised myself that if any opportunity arose to go back to Eriadne, then I'd make sure Max came with us.

In the meantime, it was interesting to know that Alwyn was still around. You never know when you just might need a Technomage.

And for the rest of my life, whenever John or Sarah felt that I was being reckless they just said one word.

Turnips.

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Two

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